

**Extended review of Carina E. Ray, *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Sex, and the Contested Politics of Colonialism in Ghana* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015)**

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# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Carina E. Ray. *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Sex, and the Contested Politics of Colonialism in Ghana*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015. 364 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-2180-2.

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One advantage of being slow to complete a book review is that one has a longer time in which to appraise the impact of a book on a scholarly field. Winner of the American Historical Association's 2016 Wesley-Logan prize for African diaspora history, and the Aidoo-Snyder prize for outstanding books on the experiences of African women, *Crossing the Color Line* has already made its mark in African and African diaspora studies. It is also clear that the subject matter, methodological approach, and analytical framework are speaking to readerships in the history of race, empire, gender, and sexuality. There can be no doubt that this is an important book.

At the simplest level, Ray sets out to explain why intimate interracial relationships shifted from being "indispensable" in the precolonial era of Atlantic commerce, to "undesirable" in the age of formal empire. She seeks to identify the specific ways in which interracial relationships were targeted for state intervention during the colonial era, both in the Gold Coast and in the United Kingdom, and to highlight the consequences for couples and families, for the formation of anticolonial nationalist projects and, more broadly, for changing conceptions of legitimate sexuality.

*Crossing the Color Line* is divided into two parts, of which the first is the longer and more detailed. Here, Ray deals with the changes wrought by the United Kingdom's formal colonization of the Gold Coast (chapters 1 and 2); the subsequent drive to clamp down on the practice of "concubinage" between "European" officials and "local" or, in the language of the time, "native" women (chapters 3 and 4); and the small number of colonial of-

ficers who decided to formally marry their Gold Coast partners (chapter 5).

The second part of the book addresses the relationships that were formed by West African male workers and white women in the colonial metropole, highlighting the violence that was meted out to such couples, not only during the race riots of 1919, but also in subsequent state interventions which sought to prevent them from settling together in the Gold Coast (chapter 6). Awareness in West Africa of the 1919 race riots fused with historic resentments against the promiscuous and/or predatory behavior of European men in the Gold Coast, their propensity to "ruin" and discard young African women, and to abandon the children so conceived. Thus debates about sex across the color line, critiques of European hypocrisy, and a renewed emphasis on respectability and responsibility, became powerful elements of anticolonial and nationalist discourses among the politician-journalists of the Gold Coast (chapter 7). When West African students and future political leaders came to Britain in the post-WWII period, they too entered relationships with white women, forming interracial communities of care which sustained political struggle. While these relationships certainly occasioned much comment and some opposition, direct state intervention was more muted in the era of decolonization (chapter 8).

Running through Ray's narrative is a persistent concern with the construction of racial difference; with gender, class, and nationality as mutually constitutive elements of race; and with the ways in which new forms of distance between members of newly defined racial

groups were enforced and contested in specific historical circumstances. This is evident from the first chapter, in which Ray reflects upon recent historiography of West Africa in the era of the Atlantic slave trade. Renewed emphasis on the advantages of West African political and commercial elites, and on their ability to shape their relations with Europeans within preexisting sociocultural and political frameworks, is captured most neatly in the title of Randy Sparks's 2014 study of Annamaboe on the Gold Coast: *Where the Negroes are Masters*. But it is also evident in other recent studies of the Fante in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including that of Rebecca Schumway, who provides a nuanced examination of the mechanisms and dynamics of dispute resolution (among other things). Intimate interracial relations were governed through similar frameworks, in which Gold Coast elites conceived of themselves as "landlords" and their European trading counterparts as "strangers," with the former in a position either to impose, or at very least to skilfully negotiate, most of the terms of their engagement with the latter. In this context, then, intimate interracial relations between European men and West African women were deemed neither illicit nor undesirable, and were certainly not uncommon.

Ray's discussion of the precolonial period, however, quickly leads readers to conceptual issues which return in different guises through the remainder of her book. Firstly, she asks what kinds of intimate interracial relations were present on the Gold Coast and how they were understood by those who participated in or directly observed them. It is clear that the temporal scale of such relations, and the nature and degree of subordination, obligation, and entanglement entailed within them, varied considerably. The precolonial era of Atlantic commerce saw the sanctioned multiple rape of enslaved African women by European men. It also saw the establishment of publicly legitimized and long-standing unions between European traders and West African women who lived in the coastal trading towns.

Clearly, the relations that arose between European men and West African women were shaped by the prior status of, and other resources available to, each of the individuals in question. And these statuses and resources were in themselves reflective (to some extent) of the nature, strength, or malleability of African and European hierarchies of birth; the factors which either heightened or diminished vulnerability to enslavement; and the structuring of opportunities for achievement and wealth creation in the context of Atlantic commerce. Thus the fact that a union was publicly legitimized and long-

standing, or even that it provided opportunities for both parties to accrue wealth through the extension or solidification of commercial networks, did not mean that it was "equal" or even that it had been "freely" entered into. Some of those selected as wives for European "strangers" were the slaves of prominent coastal families. And even when women were of "free" status, they had to operate within both African and European structures of patriarchy, and—as Pernille Ipsen has emphasized—within a context where the generation of wealth had become increasingly tied to the Atlantic traffic in human beings.

Whether the goal is to compare the perspectives of the different individuals within one relationship, or to categorize for analytical purposes the types of intimate interracial relations that are documented in the primary sources across a given period of time, the first questions that arise are, which man and which woman? For Ray, there is no such thing as "the local African perspective" on interracial relationships, far less "the native woman's perspective." Where individuals appear in the primary sources, they appear in specific positions, with their own trajectories, and different degrees of access to resources, which either widen or narrow their horizon of possibilities, and shape their individual assessments of benefit, risk, and alternative. This lesson is set out in the introduction and the first chapter, and is carefully applied throughout the remainder of the book.

The establishment of colonial rule entailed an attack on the frameworks in which African elites had previously engaged with European merchants. The Europeans who came to the Gold Coast to implement crown colony rule sought to replace dynamics of negotiation and mutual interest with a structure of command. The introduction of a color bar in the colonial civil service, and different scales of pay for local and expatriate officers, engendered particular resentment. Education, achievement, and competence were now relegated to the status of secondary criteria by which Africans could compete against each other for employment, while the presumed superiority of Europeans guaranteed them entry at a different level on better terms. Precisely because superiority was presumed, and precisely because the presumption did not match up with long-established patterns of interaction on the Gold Coast, it had to be vigorously defended. For Ray, presumed superiority was defended in the Gold Coast through a strident, but ultimately contradictory and unsustainable, insistence on distance between "Africans" and "Europeans."

Interestingly, biracial children were not at the heart

of “the problem,” as conceived by early twentieth-century senior British colonial officials, for it was assumed that such children could be categorized as African and integrated into their African families. Nor was prostitution a key target for colonial intervention. So long as prostitution was perceived as a temporally limited and semi-anonymous transaction between an individual man who was willing to pay, and an individual woman who either wanted or needed the money, its potential to damage European prestige was deemed to be limited. Clearly, prostitution was illicit and undesirable, but many senior colonial officials continued to regard it as unavoidable in view of “normal” male urges and the “shortage of European women” in the Gold Coast.

Thus it was not interracial sex *per se* that was targeted in colonial circulars. Rather, Governor Rodgers’s 1907 circular within the Gold Coast, and the secretary of state’s wider reaching circular of 1909, were both concerned with concubinage—the practice by which European men entered into ongoing but ill-defined intimate relationships with “native” women. Such relationships were not marriages as defined under British law or under the Gold Coast marriage ordinance of 1884—which is to say that they were not lifelong monogamous unions. They were temporally indeterminate, and the benefits and obligations for either party were subject to renegotiation in channels which Europeans could not easily control or interpret. Concubinage was dangerous precisely because it was ambiguous. It threatened to imbricate colonial officials in their concubines’ extended families, to compromise their “neutrality” in the eyes of other “natives,” and to make them subject to claims that they did not fully understand or at least could not control (for example, claims based on what was “customary,” which were deemed suitable for the resolution of disputes between “natives” but not for those between “natives” and “Europeans”). Concubinage, in other words, collapsed the physical, social, and juridical distance between colonizer and colonized. In exposing Europeans’ intimate involvement in African social relations, concubinage compromised their claim to stand aloof from African society in order to govern it towards a higher state of civilization.

Ironically, the more the colonial state sought to prevent its European employees from engaging in concubinage, the greater the number of accusations that were made, and the more these accusations revealed the entanglements of individual Europeans with their African subordinates—not least when African complainants testified about colonial officials to their superior officers, and when Europeans testified against each other in a bid to

settle old scores. The unedifying spectacle of accusation, defense, and counteraccusation drew ever more attention to “the problem,” to the point where senior officials deemed it expedient to allow the anticoncubinage circulars to wither away (chapter 4).

Neither the Gold Coast governor nor the Colonial Office could claim that the anticoncubinage measures had been successful in defending European prestige. Nor were they prepared for the four instances in the 1940s in which European officials publicly married Gold Coast women and insisted upon legal recognition of these unions (chapter 5). While these marriages were denigrated both as “an epidemic” and a form of “madness” which would surely lead their perpetrators to ruin, Ray traces the history of the couples and their considerable degree of success in establishing stable homes, raising children, maintaining careers, and reconciling their in-laws.

These first five chapters are impressive for their recognition of both the possibilities and the limitations of the sources, and for the ways in which they contextualize and theorize historical evidence. A few examples will suffice to highlight the compelling nature of Ray’s subject matter and her interpretative skills. Marcus Clarke was one of the first “European” officers to fall afoul of the drive against concubinage. On the one hand, Ray acknowledges that the official correspondence regarding such cases is a very limited source, for only colonial civil servants were bound by the circulars. The experiences of Europeans who worked for mission societies or private trading, mining, and timber companies are scarcely mentioned in the official correspondence, yet they far outnumbered those employed in various branches of the administration and the technical departments of the Gold Coast. On the other hand, however, the correspondence generated by the Clarke case is voluminous, allowing the evidence and arguments of Clarke himself to be compared with that of other local officials on the Gold Coast and as well as senior officials in the Colonial Office in London.

And Ray spots a fascinating detail: Clarke was categorized as European for purposes of pay and promotion, but he originated in the West Indies. Accusations about his immoral intentions towards young African girls, and his abuse of his position to gain access to them, unfolded in a context of uncertainty around the employment of well-qualified West Indians in the West African colonies. Senior officials disagreed among themselves about the necessity and merit of excluding West Indians in order

to tighten the linkage between whiteness and colonial power. Here we see very clearly why Ray is so attuned to the specific positions of the individuals who appear in her primary sources, and why she is resistant to presenting them as representative of either “the African” or “the European” perspective.

In her treatment of the case of F. W. Greig, an assistant surveyor of roads, Ray further demonstrates her skills. Greig was accused by a “native timekeeper,” Mr Robertson, of seducing his “junior wife,” Ambah. But Ambah is not just “a native woman.” She had a distinctive trajectory. Ambah and her mother were war captives whom Mr Robertson had “redemmed.” When her mother died, Ambah was rendered wholly dependent on Mr Robertson, who fed and clothed her through what remained of her childhood, and then decided to take her as a “junior wife.” Following the archival trail, Ray identifies alternative accounts in which Robertson was accused of sending Ambah to seduce other men in order that he could claim from them adultery compensation payments. Deploying insights gleaned from earlier studies of gender relations in the context of emancipation from slavery (such as *Abina and the Important Men*, 2012 by Trevor Getz and Liz Clarke), Ray pinpoints Ambah’s particular position in a series of dependent, hierarchical, and exploitative relations. She thus sets out for her readers a horizon of possibilities in which Ambah’s actions, and her relationship to a European man might be interpreted, while resisting the temptation to speak for Ambah or to decide upon her “true” motives. The reader is thereby empowered to compare the options available to Ambah, and the possible configurations of her relationship to a European man, with the radically different situation of other women, such as Grace Chapman, of the elite Keta family, who married assistant district commissioner Donald Turner in 1944.

In researching the second part of the book—and particularly the chapters on relationships between white women and African men in the United Kingdom—Ray makes more extensive use of oral history, following up with those spouses who were able and willing to talk directly about their experiences, and, in other cases with their children. Chapter 6 is a particularly important exposition of the dire human consequences of the use of state power to enforce mythical racial hierarchy. While historians such as Laura Tabili, Peter Fryer, and Diane Frost have studied various aspects of the 1919 race riots, Ray gives detailed attention to the requests of interracial couples to escape interwar metropolitan racism by settling in the African colony from which the husband originated. These requests were resisted on the grounds

that the African men in question did not have sufficient economic resources to accommodate European wives in the standard that colonial officials deemed to be necessary to preserve white prestige. By refusing to pay the passages of wives, government officials presented lone return as the best or only option for African men who had been rendered close to destitute through racial attack and discrimination in housing and employment. The very poverty that had been imposed upon these interracial couples and families was then used against them as evidence of their unsuitability for life in colonial British West Africa.

Unsurprisingly, Gold Coast politician-journalists were angered by the overt and vicious racism of the metropole against its colonial “subjects,” and made determined efforts to highlight the hypocrisy of colonial claims given the long history of European men’s corrupt, exploitative, and self-serving encounters with African women. Europeans were thus exposed as a source of moral degradation rather than moral uplift in African society, and were declared unfit to rule. Ray demonstrates how debates around interracial sex were constitutive of a specific kind of anticolonial and nationalist discourse, with implications for the regulation of sexuality in the independence era—a theme to which she returns in the conclusion. The final chapter is the shortest of the book, serving to launch Ray’s ongoing research on the prominent nationalists who formed enduring interracial unions in the era of decolonization and new nationhood.

Precisely because Ray is sensitive to the limits of her sources, this book says relatively little about sex per se. Ray makes a powerful case for the significance and relevance of affective ties in historical analysis and, following Jennifer Cole and Lynn Thomas, insists that these ties reside in a wider picture of social relations and material exchange, and cannot be understood only as “psychobiological essences located in individuals.”[1] It is of course very difficult to enter the lifeworlds of the individuals whom one encounters in archival sources, or even to interpret what is said about emotions in the context of oral history interviews. Ray’s handling of her sources is impressive. Many authors claim to be bringing colony and metropole into a single analytical field, but few of them really succeed in highlighting transnational dynamics without forsaking detailed knowledge of social relations in specific times and places. Ray’s book is one of the successes.

#### Note

[1]. Jennifer Cole and Lynn M. Thomas, eds., *Love in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 6.

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